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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 DJIBOUTI 000149

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: ISLAM IN DJIBOUTI

Classified By: Pol/Econ Erinn C. Reed for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (SBU) Summary: During recent years, the Islamic world has witnessed changes in religious attitudes and verbal outlook. Fundamental views that oppose all things external to Islamic culture expressed by scholars and preachers have taken hold in some Muslim societies. This fervent opposition of anything not adhering to the strictures of fundamental Islam has led some societies to withdraw into themselves. Djibouti is known for practicing a moderate and tolerant version of Islam since the early ages of the religion. However, Djibouti has not been able to avoid the impact of recent movements pushing for a return to the fundamentals of Islam. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Islam took hold in Djibouti in the religion's early years. Prior to French colonial rule, religious leaders were often leaders in community affairs. They taught religion, as well as administered affairs such as marriage contracts, inheritance, and resolving conflicts with Shari'a law. Islamic education was based on memorization of the Quran. At higher levels, education focused on the Arabic language and Islamic jurisprudence. Memorization in quranic schools (known in Djibouti as Madrassad or Mal'amad) had become part of Djiboutian culture and was seen in nearly every populated area. Religious leaders exercised traditional authority over their communities through a network system, uniting different localities under a set of rules and traditional regulations blended with Shari'a. However, colonial rule greatly weakened the authority of traditional community leaders overall.

3. (SBU) Djibouti's constitution, established in 1992, declares Islam as the state religion. Statistics show an estimated 99 percent of its 650,000 citizens as Sunni Muslim. The actual number of practicing Muslims is much less. The country observes Muslim holy days as national holidays. Djibouti is culturally integrated in the wider Islamic world through its membership in the Organization of Islamic Conference and the Arab League. However, the Government of Djibouti employs modern interpretations of Islamic texts in the creation of national programs and policies. The President is required to take an oath on the Holy Quran at inauguration, but religion governs only a few aspects of Djiboutian politics. The Ministry of Muslim Affairs was created to monitor the affairs of Muslims, such as oversight of mosques. Islamic law based on the Quran is used in family matters and is administered by family judges within the Ministry of Justice. These two instances are the only areas where religion governs instead of merely influencing.

4. (SBU) Historically, Djibouti has adhered to the Shafi'i school of thought, one of four in the Islamic faith. The Quran and the Sunna (sayings) of the Prophet are considered to be sacrosanct among Djiboutians. Recently, the country has witnessed changes and a loss of the historic adherence to the Shafi'i school. During the last decade, the Hanbali and Tabligh schools of thought, brought from Saudi Arabia and India, have developed significantly in Djibouti. The Hanbali school is commonly known as Wahabism, named after the movement's founder, Mohamed Abdoul Wahab.

5. (C) Djibouti has not been able to ignore the active role of Islamic movements and the impact of their calls for a return to traditional Islamic values and legal authority in the daily life of Muslims. It would be necessary to create a trans-clan organization to achieve these goals in Djibouti, something that is difficult to do on secular issues. Even though circles of Islamic education are well established in a sustainable system throughout Djibouti, there is an educational migration of Djiboutian students to the Islamic world. Most of these students head towards Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and since 2001, Sudan. All of these countries are centers of modern Islamic movements. Djiboutians have not been receptive to Islamic radicalism, tending instead to identify first with their ethnic kin rather than religious ties. However, radical Islamic ideas have been gaining ground in Djibouti. More women are choosing to wear veils, and more men in Government are growing beards as a sign of religious piety. There is also evidence that some members of the Armed Forces returning from military schools in Saudi Arabia have adopted Wahabism. Resistance to these movements exists but seems to be increasingly more timid.

## Institutional Hierarchy

16. (SBU) The Cadi is the country's senior judge of Islamic law and is appointed by the Minister of Muslim Affairs. Officially titled, the Minister of State for Charitable and Religious Affairs, this position was created in May 1999 when President Ismail Omar Guelleh formed his cabinet. At his inauguration, he declared that Islam would be a central tenet of his government. Generally, Djibouti is trying to show a firm commitment to Islamic symbolism, exploiting it to fit state objectives. The mission of the Ministry of Muslim Affairs is to define the orientations of national identity in order to harmonize religious action according to socio-cultural specifications of the country and to govern all matters related to Islam, its education and the propagation of Arab-Muslim culture.

17. (C) In October 2004, the High Islamic Council (HIC) was created within the Ministry of Muslim Affairs. One of the main tasks of the HIC is to give guidance on religious matters. It advises on matters related to religious inspiration, and puts forth recommendations on general religious education and preaching orientations. The HIC is governed by a board made up of the Minister of Muslim Affairs and seven consultative members, chosen from among erudite and national Muslim leaders. The HIC controls three important services: the High Fatwa Authority, responsible for religious solutions to general and specific queries; the Da'wa Committee on Islamic Orientation, responsible for guiding religious education, promoting moderate ideas, and improving the performance of Imams; and the Mosques Council, responsible for monitoring the functioning of mosques. The Government has an effective control over the message that mosques preach. Since 9/11, sermons have been toned down to align more with western, rather than with fundamentalist, ideology. Institutions that heavily preached anti-Western and anti-Jewish sentiment are now taking a much lower profile when expressing their views.

18. (SBU) In July 2004, President Guelleh created Diwan Az Zakat (DZF) to take charge of collecting and distributing the Zakat, a compulsory charity imposed on every Muslim under the Third Pillar of Islam. This organization is headed by an executive board of nine members. Five of these positions are held by members of Djiboutian society that pay the most charity. The remaining four positions are chosen for their integrity and competence. As of yet, there have been no public calls for Djiboutians to pay their Zakat through the DZF. However, some of the board members have used the time since the organization's creation to visit Persian Gulf countries and Sudan to gain experience in similar organizations that have existed for more than a decade.

## Islamic Tendencies and Factions Present in Djibouti

19. (SBU) In the wider Islamic world, activists belonging to different schools of thought have been questioning the legitimacy of state policies, particularly those regarding the role of Islam in the State and society. These activists have formed organizations to address their way of understanding Islam, lately referred to as "political Islam." Many of the new groups and organizations can be found in Djibouti with varying levels of influence. The most prominent of these organizations are considered to be the "Salafiyah (Wahabis)" and the "Tabligh." These groups were both initially formed in the late 1950's. The Salafiyah and Tabligh groups both advocate harmonization of the indigenous culture and laws of the State with the Islamic legal system. The roots of this methodology can be seen in the Wahabi school in Saudi Arabia and the neo-Sufis in India.

110. (SBU) Though these movements share the aspiration to bring traditional Islamic values into the lives of their communities, their tactical approaches in Djibouti are mainly peaceful. The two movements believe in an evolutionary reform of the society through education and revival of pure Islamic values. The movements have represented themselves as a reawakening of the faith. This has been a phenomenon seen often when Muslims suffer an external threat, such as colonialism or invasion, with Islam employed as an ideology of liberation (Jihad). Reawakenings and moral rearmament have also been seen whenever new charismatic preachers, organizations, or brotherhoods have appeared in the religious community intensifying the call for renewal of the faith.

## Wahabi Groups in Djibouti

11. (SBU) There are several educational and political institutions present in Djibouti that adhere to the Wahabi school of thought. One of the larger schools is the Islamic Saudi Institute (ISI), supported by the Saudi Arabian Government, which provides for education under the Saudi system through the final year of High School for a yearly fee (100 USD). The ISI is a branch of the Imam Mohamed Ibn Saoud Islamic University in Riyadh. The Director of the ISI in Djibouti is appointed by the University's dean. The ISI and

its Saudi teachers reportedly enjoy diplomatic immunity while in Djibouti. The teacher complement at the ISI is made up of Saudis, Egyptians, Sudanese, and some Djiboutians. The ISI program is similar to other Saudi institutes. Basic subjects such as mathematics, literature, and sciences are mixed with religious instruction in the Quran, Islamic History, Sunna, Shari'a, and Islamic Jurisprudence. A diploma from the ISI in Djibouti entitles a student to enroll in the Imam Saoud University, however this is a rare occurrence for Djiboutian students due to Saudi regulations restricting enrollment of foreigners except those authorized by a bilateral agreement. Even so, enrollment at the ISI in Djibouti grew substantially during the 2003/2004 school year to a total of 300 full-time students.

¶12. (SBU) The Religious Consulate of Saudi Arabia, a part of the Saudi Embassy, had a central role in monitoring and funding demonstrations of a religious nature, in accordance with its beliefs. However, since 9/11, the Religious Consulate has taken on a more discreet role. Formerly located on an independent compound, the Religious Consulate has moved onto the Saudi Embassy grounds. Even so, the numbers of Saudi personnel in Djibouti are increasing each year. The head of the Saudi diplomatic mission was elevated from Charge d'affaires to the rank of Ambassador five years ago.

¶13. (SBU) There are other institutions adhering to Wahabism which play a lesser role in Djiboutian society. The Yemeni School, a high school built in 2003 following the curriculum of the Yemeni Ministry of Education, has comparatively low enrollment rates. The Yemeni School does not give religion a primary focus. Reportedly, the governments of Djibouti and Egypt agreed in 2002 to build an Egyptian Islamic institute, to be called Al Azhar. The institute has yet to be constructed due to rumored disputes over whether to use an Egyptian contractor or a local Djiboutian company.

#### Islamic NGOs and Associations

¶14. (SBU) There are two main Islamic charities present in Djibouti, one Kuwaiti and one Saudi. The Africa Relief Committee (ARC) is a Kuwaiti NGO which collects funds from Persian Gulf governments and private donors to redistribute in poor Islamic countries. This redistribution is primarily through the construction of schools and mosques, well drilling, and food distribution. The ARC has been in Djibouti for seven years. Its latest project is the construction of a compound housing an orphanage, school, dormitories, sport facilities and a mosque at a cost of 600 million Djiboutian Francs (3.5 million USD).

¶15. (SBU) The Saudi NGO is Al Nadwa or the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMI), an organization headquartered in Jeddah. This NGO has recently taken over management of the boys' orphanage in Djibouti. The WAMI has been present in Djibouti since 1999. There is some doubt among the Djiboutian community on the seriousness of this NGO's activities in Djibouti. Critics have recently cited the organizations failure to accomplish improvements promised for the boys' orphanage. There are some who believe there is a possibility of WAMI's departure from Djibouti if the apparent lack of will for its presence continues.

#### Public Diplomacy Approaches

¶16. (SBU) Embassy Djibouti has responded to the need to identify innovative ways to increase its outreach and interaction with Djibouti's Muslim population. Arab media in Muslim countries often imply the U.S. is combating Islam in the name of its War on Terrorism, and it is critical to overcome this perception. Extremist preachers and fundamentalists often pander to that sentiment in order to achieve their goals. In societies where high illiteracy rates dominate, as in Djibouti, the challenge is greater. Yet, the presence in Djibouti of the United States is viewed favorably for its larger economic impact and the daily struggle against poverty is seen as more important than focusing on or approving a call for hatred.

¶17. (SBU) Embassy Djibouti is focusing on activities that encourage face-to-face interaction between Americans and the Djiboutian community. English clubs, receptions, small-group lunches and dinners, public speeches, and school projects are examples of outreach activities currently being used. In Djibouti, winning hearts and minds is less a function of clever advertising than of maximizing the positive roles the U.S. plays here on a daily basis through U.S. aid programs, the military's civil projects, and other assistance programs, including Self-Help.

#### The Future of Islam in Djibouti

¶18. (C) Comment: While the future tenor of Islam in Djibouti is difficult to predict, a potential for growth of fundamentalism does exist. Along with growing influence from major players in the Djiboutian Islamic community such as the Wahabis and Tabligh (also known as the Khourouj), there are

smaller fundamental/extremist groups that need to be considered, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Habash and Al-Ittihad Al-Islamia. The Wahabi movement has attracted mainly educated Djiboutians, especially among the educated youth. Tabligh, on the contrary, targets the uneducated and lower socio-economic classes of Djiboutian society. The other three groups have much smaller, focused cadres of followers. The Muslim Brotherhood caters to Djiboutians educated in Egypt. Al-Habash preaches an orthodox Islam, but also has element of Islamic mysticism with strong ties to Lebanon. Al-Ittihad Al-Islamia has members present in Djibouti, but keeps a low profile. Al-Ittihad was reportedly very active in the Arta Conference in 2000 for the Somalia peace process. Their members reportedly move freely in and out of Djibouti with a blind eye from the Djiboutian Government. One of their spiritual leaders, Sheik Umar Faruk, has been allowed to broadcast religious sermons on Radio Television Djibouti on several occasions in the past few years.

19. (C) Comment cont: The majority of the Djiboutian population does not have a good base of knowledge about Islam, a fact which some believe makes it easier for them to be influenced by extremist preachers. A current issue that could cause internal turmoil for the Islamic community is the recent creation of the Family Code, which takes away some of the influence that Shari'a has on Djiboutian law. However, the Djiboutian government monitors the different Islamic factions, the issues they track, and the sermons they preach at mosques. For the moment, the growing fundamentalist movements are something to be watched carefully in Djibouti, but not a cause for alarm. End Comment.  
RAGSDALE